

## *DROSERA CISTIFLORA* L.

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Keywords: Cultivation: *Drosera cistiflora*

*Drosera cistiflora* is one of those species that everyone is familiar with, but unfortunately is grown in very few collections, because of the unavailability of plant material, and also in part to the rather unfair reputation it has of being difficult. Admittedly, it's not as straightforward as many of the commonly grown species, but is worth the extra little effort.

It is a native of the Cape region of South Africa, and inhabits seasonally wet areas, with the wet season being the cool damp winter months. It is the growth pattern of this (and indeed all species) that one should consider when trying to understand the best way to succeed with cultivation. Firstly, as it grows in the winter months in the wild, so it will in the confines of a greenhouse, giving a welcome breath of life at an usually dull and lifeless time. While the *Sarracenia* are cold and static, this plant bursts out of the soil anytime from late September through early January, with an erect green shoot that opens revealing the first sticky carnivorous leaves. These initial leaves reflex downwards and produce a small rosette, but subsequent growth takes on a different form, with a vertical stem reaching skywards, interrupted at regular intervals by 3 cm leaves held at somewhere between 30° and 45° (see Fig. 1). The stem itself varies in height from a few centimeters, up to over 30 cm (some populations considerably more) decorated with their glistening leaves. The main claim to fame of this species is, however, the flowers (see Front Cover), considered by many to be

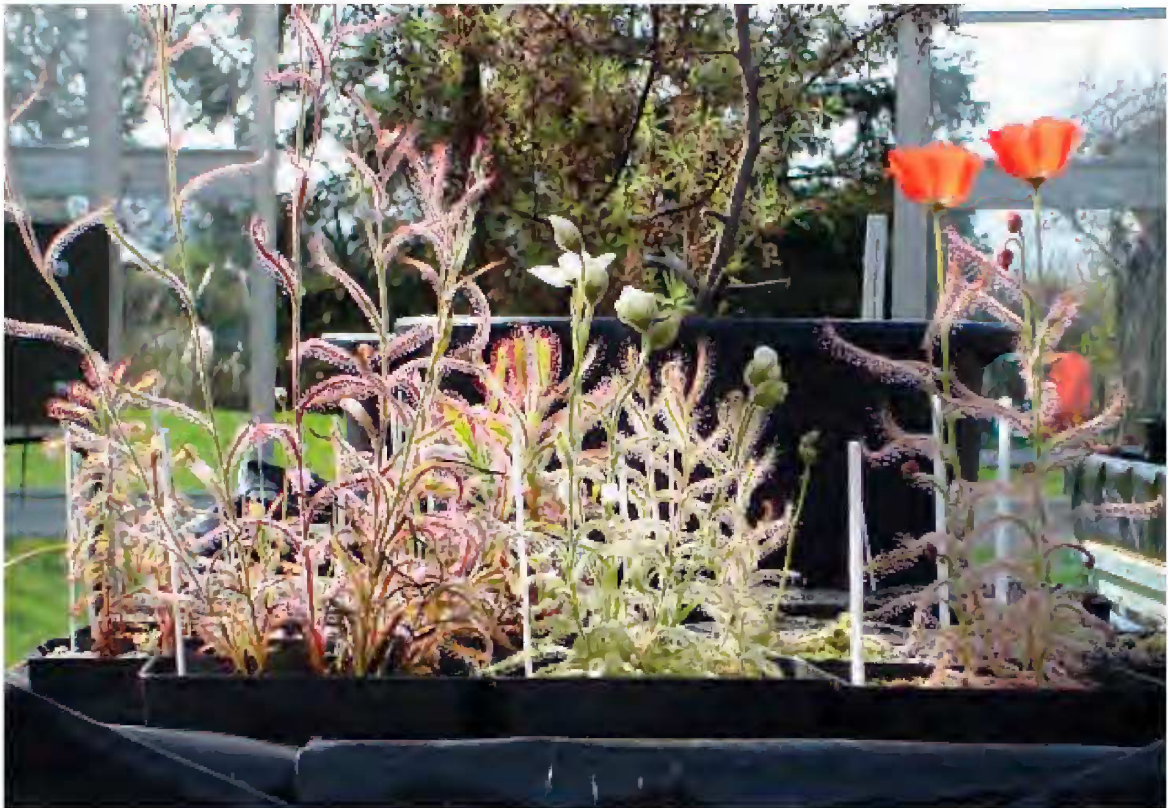


Figure 1: *Drosera cistiflora* plants in cultivation.



Figure 2: The white flowered *Drosera cistiflora* plants from Darling.

the largest in the genus. From my own experience these are up to 5 cm in diameter, and when seen for the first time cannot fail to impress even the most hardened of botanical philistines.

I currently have three types which have flowered for me. My first plants which are now some 13 years old are completely reliable, and every year produce 3 cm diameter pink flowers with white petal bases darkening to a green center. The plants themselves are rather wiry, and unusually continue to produce a growing stem from the last leaf axil below the flower which forms another 2 or 3 leaves. This characteristic has led to this plant being given its own specific rank—*D. variegata* Debert. These plants originate from Gifberg.

A couple of years later I had success with a white-flowered form from Darling, which like the previous has become a regular performer. This is an altogether shorter stockier form to 20 cm in height, and without the wiry appearance of the pink form. The flowers are larger at about 4 cm in diameter, and although I call it white, there is an element of very pale yellow in the mix, which contrasts perfectly with a dark green center. (see Fig. 2).

A few years ago, I was treated to one of those rare moments when you are literally stopped in your tracks. A supposedly red form of this plant, also from Darling, had been in bud for some time and on this particular morning was the first thing to catch my eye as I walked in to the greenhouse. I had heard that the color of these plants could be intense, but in nearly 30 years of growing carnivorous plants, I have yet to see a flower which could rival what this plant had produced. At a little over 5 cm in diameter, this is the largest *D. cistiflora* flower I have seen, and sported a color I can best describe as pillar box red with a dark green centre (see Fig. 3). All of the images I took at the time show the flower as being somewhat orange-red. The plants when they flowered were approximately

25 cm in height, with pink tentacled leaves. Unfortunately, this flowering has yet to be repeated, and I have noticed that the plants are smaller than they were then. Perhaps a lack of food, or maybe I allowed them to dry out too much? I shall experiment with feeding them to see if the flowering is as a result of available food stored in the roots.

After flowering, the plants gradually yellow and die back as the sun becomes stronger and the days become longer and drier, eventually losing their visible parts and retreating underground to survive the hot dry summer months as thick, fleshy roots. Here they remain while the ground above them bakes solid, only re-emerging with the returning rains and cooler temperatures to begin their growth period once again.

In cultivation, they should be kept in a little water whilst in growth, and this should be allowed to be taken up by the plants before replenishing, taking care not to allow them to dry. Once they begin to die back, reduce the watering gradually so as to allow them to dry slowly until they disappear completely. Over the summer months, they should be given an occasional quantity of water to their bases, not enough to soak them, but sufficient to prevent the roots desiccating. For this reason, it is wise to grow them in large pots with room for their roots to spread around, in a compost of 8 parts silver sand to 2 parts peat moss.

The best way to propagate this species is by seed, and it was thought that as they are winter growers, the seed should be sown in the autumn. However, as I stated earlier let's consider their wild growth cycle. The plants flower and set seed at the end of their growth period before the onset of warm spring weather and as their soil is drying. The seed then sits in its dormant state through the fierce summer heat, only germinating after the first rains and when the temperature is a little more conducive to growth. Therefore, I now sow seeds of this and other winter growing species in the spring, at the time they would naturally be shed by the parent plant, and allow them the hot dry desiccating summer they need before autumn germination. Once they are soaked through in September or October, many tiny green shoots can be seen in a matter of only a few weeks.

The first year is the most critical for these plants, as they take a while to develop the substantial roots required to sustain them through the summer, and you can easily destroy them at this stage if they dry too much.

I have also had success with smoking the seeds in a barbeque with smoldering peat over night. This replicates the bush fires that are a vital part of so many ecosystems in South Africa. Simply sow the seeds in pots and wet thoroughly, light the peat (this can be the tricky part), and when smoking well, position the tray well above. Cover and leave. This can be done in the autumn, and is another way of unlocking the inherent dormancy the seeds have.

Although as I said earlier, there is more care required, the extra effort is well worth the kind of reward that these incredible plants can repay.



Figure 3: Stunning red *Drosera cistiflora* flowers!